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Building connections across communities

The heartbeat of so many communities, the local pub brings people of all ages together, supports local jobs and sports clubs and helps to alleviate the growing problem of loneliness in remote areas

“I have visited half the pubs in the country over the past few years. Sometimes the pub is nearly the only thing left in a village,” says Pat Crotty, a former president of the Vintners’ Federation of Ireland (VFI). “Births, marriages and deaths are marked in the local pub. If you took it away, that community would break down. Local pubs provide the face-to-face connection that people need.”

Crotty has seen how pubs make the effort to be relevant and appeal to different generations. “It’s about testing the water and seeing what customers want, whether that is a range of gins, craft beers or food,” he says. “In so many cases, publicans allow groups to use their premises to meet. I called into one pub in the middle of nowhere and a knitting club had gathered there.”

Last month Crotty, owner of Paris Texas in Kilkenny City, gave a radio interview on KCLR 96FM calling for new local food suppliers as the pub will be revamping its menu in November. It’s just one example of how pubs in Ireland are proactive in supporting local communities and the vital role they play in Irish society.

CULTURAL SUPPORT

Music has become an integral part of the Irish pub offering and Crotty notes that many pubs around the country are helping local musicians to make a living. Paris Texas, for example, has live music daily from 6.30pm to 11.30pm. Like most pubs, it also supports local sports clubs, including the ladies basketball team Marble City Hawks, which competed in the Women’s Super League for the first time this year.

John Clendennen, of Giltraps Pub in Kinnitty, Co Offaly believes pubs need to compete right across society in terms of recreational activities. Later this year, he plans to embrace the fact that the first phase of a free 37km mountain bike trail will be opened near the pub, which is located at the foot of the Slieve Bloom Mountains.

“We work with a number of different groups to run barbeques and music events to combine with adventure races, cycling and kayaking,” he says. “We have diversified our offering and added accommodation so we can be a destination providing a full package. Locals and tourists mix and more people coming through the door means jobs are created for local people.” When Clendennen joined the business seven years ago, only family members worked there. Now it employs 10 people.

PUBLIC SERVICE

VFI President Padraic McGann is the third generation of McGanns to run the family pub in Monivea, Co Galway. He believes rural pubs are keeping rural Ireland alive.

“Loneliness out in the country is one of the big issues rural pubs are addressing,” he says. “Because of the drink driving laws an awful lot of people are not bothered to go out, but pubs like our own will bring them home. We provide a free service in areas where there are no taxis. It’s so important for people to be able to come to a place for a chat and some company.”

McGann says the family is always coming up with new ideas to keep the pub going, from fashion shows to concerts and card games every Friday. “Around 56% of pubs outside Dublin don’t turn over €4,000 a week but will still keep their doors open. They are providing a vital service. To be sustainable, they have to keep canvassing customers and reassure them they will be able to get home.”



Aaron Dreeling, Assistant Food Manager; Padraic Rafter, General Manager and James Hogan, Senior Chef, pictured at Paris Texas, High Street, Kilkenny.



Percy and John Clendennen in the family pub, Giltraps, Kinnitty, Co Offaly

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At the Heart of the Community



Paul Fogarty, White House Pub, Roscrea, Co Tipperary

PAUL FOGARTY
WHITE HOUSE PUB
 ROSCREA, CO TIPPERARY

There are few pubs so ensconced in the heritage, history and community spirit of a town as that of the White House pub in the heart of Roscrea.

The family run bar and restaurant sits snugly beside the town's most famous tourist attraction, the 13th century castle once home to the Butlers of Ormond.

"The castle was a King John's Castle so rumour has it he was fond of a beer so he built the castle beside a good pub and we were here first," jokes proprietor Paul Fogarty and second generation owner, proudly describing the intricate maze of secret tunnels from the castle which spread out deep under the hardwood floors of the family business.

When the Fogarty's first arrived in Roscrea via Howth in the early 80's, there were some 37 other public houses in the town. Today there are just eleven.

Determined to keep his parents' legacy alive, Paul says taking a proactive approach to marketing and networking were key to keeping the White House going during the downturn.

"We started doing a lot of promotion on social media and I attended a lot of trade shows selling the pub as a destination to coach tours travelling around Ireland. We started marketing the pub as a mid way point where tourists could get off the bus, tour around the castle and have their lunch. It definitely gave a boost to the town by having all these visitors here," he says.

Today the White House has positioned itself as the heartbeat of the community, a place that's more than just a local.

However during the hardest years of the recession, Paul says a "small aircraft could have landed on the main street and not touched a car."

Eager to help revitalise the town, Paul, along with local Fianna Fail councillor Michael Smith, set about establishing a festival to promote local craft and food producers. Hence the Taste of Roscrea was born.

Today this annual event, which takes place on the famed Roscrea Castle grounds, attracts thousands of visitors each year for the near week long event

bringing together community groups, schools and producers from the town and surrounding areas to take part and showcase the best Roscrea has to offer.

Having long been a champion of different sporting clubs and organisations in the locality, including Killavilla soccer club, Clonakenny GAA and Roscrea GAA, this year the pub decided to lend their support to the local Tidy Towns Committee by erecting 122 window boxes along the main street.

"The place was awash with flowers and hanging baskets. The street looked so alive and it's since encouraged others to take part and do the same thing," he says smiling.

"Personally I think we're more than just a pub and it's a credit to our staff, some of whom have 30 years of service, that we have positioned ourselves at the centre of the community. We have people coming in here since we opened in 1981 and to us they are more like family than customers," says the proud Tipperary man.

Pub's Progress



Pubs around the country have evolved into destination venues which are all about having an overall experience, rather than just a drink and chat

Ola Flanagan in Lock 13, Sallins, Co Kildare

While studying bar management at Dublin Institute of Technology in 1999, PJ Kavanagh enjoyed going to The Comedy Cellar at the International Bar on Wicklow Street. It was there he got to know Bernard O'Shea of 'Republic of Telly' fame. This set him on the path to creating one of the most prominent comedy venues outside Dublin by expanding the pub in Portlaoise, Co Laois that has been in his family since 1869.

"I was eager to try a few different things at PJ Kavanagh's and test the market. The town had gotten a bit bigger and I thought something similar to The Comedy Cellar might work," he says.

The Kavanagh family demolished and rebuilt the pub on Portlaoise's main street in 2000 to include a 60-seater venue upstairs. With O'Shea as MC, the first comedy show was held in September 2002.

The New Zealand duo Flight of the Conchords sold out, but the second show, an Irish comedian that Kavanagh prefers not to name, only attracted an audience of four people.

"It wasn't an overnight success, but something that has grown legs over the years with perseverance," he says. "With Bernard as resident MC, we have managed to consistently get the big names in comedy – from Tommy Tiernan to Kevin Bridges – who like to come here and try out new material."

Receiving a special commendation at the IMRO Live Music Venue of the Year Awards last February, PJ Kavanagh's now incorporates a 110-seater venue for comedy plus a standing venue for 250 people outside for music. It also hires other venues, such as the Midlands Park Hotel, which have larger capacity to meet the demand for the likes of Neil Delamere and Jason Byrne.

A FATHER TED MOMENT

Comedy is one aspect of Mickey Finn's in Redcross, Co Wicklow which makes it more than just a pub. Every year it runs the Redcross Father Ted Fest, where staff members dress up as the characters and items on the menu include bacon and cabbage and 'Father Ted's Bread Pudding'.

Mickey Finn's actually started out as a restaurant 15 years ago. Owners Leigh and Ashley Williams decided in 2007 they wanted to put Redcross on the map and so went for a full licence. "We weren't inheriting an audience but rather building our own," says Leigh Williams.

"Because we're off the beaten track, we knew we had to do something good to get people off their couches."

In the early days that mainly meant having chefs on site and offering a varied menu. With the growing craft beer scene in 2012, the Williams took things a big step further by building their own brewery. This turned Mickey Finn's into a tourist attraction where people can enjoy a full package – a tour of the brewery, beer sampling and a menu marrying beer and food.

“The fact that we became a genuine craft brewery was the biggest thing to change our approach,” says Williams. “It kicked us on the path of beer being the new wine. Every time the brewer comes up with a new beer he talks to the chefs about how to incorporate it into a recipe.” Dishes on Mickey Finn's menu include pies made with stout and a dessert called ‘Beeramisú’. It has recently started to introduce street food for more casual dining in the brewery courtyard. “The African street food event we held with crocodile on the menu really got people talking,” notes Williams.

“
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 we knew we had to do something
 good to get people off their
 couches**
 ”

- Leigh Williams, Mickey Finn's, Redcross, Co Wicklow

HONING THEIR CRAFT

Moving northwards to Sallins, Co Kildare, Barry Flanagan, owner of Flanagan's Mill Lock 13 also believes in allowing customers to engage directly with the brewing process. He and his wife Ola opened Kildare Brewing Company on the site in July 2017.

“We decided that the only way to have 100% consistent craft beer was to brew it ourselves,” says Flanagan. “Our customers are now doing brewery tours, trying sampling paddles or simply asking staff about the hops and malts in the beers. Six years ago, customers wouldn't have even contemplated that type of question.”

When the Flanagans took over the business in 2012, it needed a lot of love and attention to regain the reputation it once prided itself on – a true family-run pub. “We decided to change the name of the lounge to Lock 13 Gastro Pub as we wanted to start afresh,” Flanagan explains. “We wanted to be different to our competitors and offer something we truly believed in. That was a focus on local beers served with locally sourced food.”

Sales have doubled since the couple's first year of operation and staff numbers have gone up from 12 to over 30. “Customers come to us because we offer simple pub fare, but with a twist and at reasonable prices,” says Flanagan. “Our young and energetic staff have become founts of knowledge about craft beers and brewing. We're firm believers that if you don't reinvest or refocus your business in the pub trade you will be left behind.”



Leigh & Ashley Williams outside Mickey Finn's, Redcross, Co Wicklow



PJ Kavanagh in PJ Kavanagh's, Portlaoise, Co Laois

Recipe for success

Pubs are now the second most popular destination to eat food outside the home, which isn't surprising considering the standard and variety of offering that is available around the country



The stylish interior of The Oyster Tavern, Cork

Whether it is casual or fine dining, pubs outside Dublin are really giving hotels and restaurants a run for money when it comes to serving food. In fact, the quality of their offerings has gone up so much that pubs are now regularly featured in the Michelin Guide – something which was unheard of until recently.

While carveries and soup and sandwiches are still popular, so many pubs have gone far beyond this and are focused on making their menus and service different and special. In some cases this means an eclectic, international selection of dishes to appeal to a wide audience. For others, it's about letting customers know that all ingredients are fresh and sourced locally.

Pubs have invested in top-of-the-range kitchen equipment and are employing professionally trained staff. Indeed, some are actually owned by experienced chefs who like to put their own stamp on the menu. Food has become much more than an add-on – it is now an integral part of the Irish pub's identity.

Any dish you order at the Oyster Tavern in Cork City is made using fresh ingredients supplied daily by businesses in the English Market, which is right on its doorstep.

"The English Market is literally our pantry. The businesses there have been so helpful and encouraging," says owner of the Oyster Tavern Alan Clancy. "International tourists can't take any of the produce home and the traders tell them they can try it around the corner from our menu."

Clancy also owns House in Dublin and House in Limerick. "We created House in Dublin as we saw an opportunity to give people a complete night out including drink, food and music. In Limerick we are doing the same and food plays a very big part in what we provide. People can book a table and sit there from 7pm to 2am. We have the capacity to seat groups of 80 people for dinner," says Clancy.

SEMI-FORMAL DINING

Also in Limerick, Flanagan's Townhouse on Thomas Street has undergone a major refurbishment including the installation of a new kitchen. The result is a "semi-formal dining experience in intimate surroundings", according to owner Cathal Quinn. "We gutted the building which is 215 years old and renovated it to reflect its Georgian character, but in a contemporary setting," he says. "We didn't want to be niche nor offer bacon and cabbage or hot pot. The menu aims to appeal to a more discerning palate."



Fresh fish at The Oarsman



The Oarsman Inn, Carrick-on-Shannon

Produced by a team of four chefs, Flanagan's Townhouse offers an international cuisine range – everything from steaks, to Indian dishes, chicken wings, traditional fish and chips and pork fillets. "We are very selective about the wine to go with each dish. There are a lot of international companies in Limerick and the Shannon Free Zone and we wanted to appeal to the broadest possible base of customers," says Quinn, who also owns the gastro pub Flanagan's on the Lake in Killaloe, Co Tipperary.

A FRESH APPROACH

When brothers Conor and Ronan Maher took over The Oarsman pub in Carrick-on-Shannon, Co Leitrim in 2002, they felt the time was right to bring a new food philosophy to the town.

"We introduced a progressive, modern Irish menu, buying in all the ingredients and cooking everything fresh, including sauces, chutneys and ice creams," explains Conor Maher.

Ronan had worked in five-star hotels in the UK and South Africa and was focused on flavour and presentation. Meanwhile, Conor's experience of working in a gastro pub in the UK brought a more casual side to the table.

“We fused the two together and found something in between, which tones down fine dining so it’s less stuffy and makes casual dining more attractive in presentation,” says Conor. “From there, it was important to us to hire people with a passion and desire to cook food, not just prepare it.”

The Mahers love to work closely with local food producers, including famer James Maguire, who supplies the organic pork for The Oarsman’s popular pork trio dish. They also grow their own vegetables for use at the gastro pub. Mint from their garden is used to make mint jelly and the beetroot, kale, cabbage, carrots, potatoes, rhubarb and raspberries they grow are used in various dishes.

One of the chefs the Mahers hired in the early days was Sham Hanifa, who opened Buffalo Boy a year ago in Carrick-on-Shannon with Brian Whelan and former Roscommon footballer Sean Purcell. Buffalo Boy is a steakhouse which serves a selection of Irish gin, whiskey and craft beers. On the site of an abandoned pub, it is a brand new premises built from scratch.

“We saw a gap in the market to pair food with craft beer, gin and whiskey. We use Jameson whiskey in our sauces, and marinate our beef with fine whiskey. Gins are used in deserts and we work with local gin distillery Drumshanbo Gunpowder to come up with new ideas.” The Buffalo Boy menu includes buffalo steak, supplied by famous buffalo farmer Johnny Lynch in Macroom, Co Cork.

CHEF AT THE HELM

Owner of Murph’s Bistro in Derrygarra, Co Cavan, Fergus Murphy, has over 33 years’ experience as a chef, having worked in Michelin-starred restaurants in the UK and Switzerland. As a member of the European community of cooks and chefs Euro Toques, he believes in adhering to its values.

“My approach is simple food done really well with two or three flavours on a plate. The ingredients are touched by two or three pairs of hands, not 12,” explains Murphy. “I’m not into food art; it’s all about the flavours.”



Fergus Murphy outside Murph’s Bistro at the Derrygarra Inn, Cavan



Fine dining at Murph’s Bistro

The menu at Murph’s Bistro is a mixture of casual and fine dining with every element freshly prepared on the day. Among its special dishes are slow-cooked Jacob’s Ladder (beef ribs) and tuskfish supplied by Albatros Sea Foods in Co Donegal marinated in wine from Bordeaux in France.

Murphy has designed a state-of-the-art kitchen for his team of six chefs. Often seen mingling with customers in his chef whites, he is currently investing in a new outdoor space and conservatory which will extend the dining space next year.

THINKING DIFFERENTLY

A random chat with a builder who was putting in a new smoking area at The Brewery Tap in Tullamore, Co Offaly a couple of years ago led to owner Paul Bell taking the pub’s food offering in a new direction. “Knocking a doorway into the hall gave us improved access to the kitchen upstairs,” he explains. “By coincidence a friend of mine who was a chef, Niall Kavanagh, became available around the same time and we put our heads together.”

Tullamore is a bustling town with a lot of food offerings so Bell knew he needed to come up with a different style. “We went for the gourmet-style offering, with everything cooked to order. The beer batter for the fish is made with local beer and the chips are hand cut. We felt it was important to have plenty of healthy options and chose to use trendy crockery and provide table service,” says Bell.

“When the Ploughing Championships were cancelled on the Wednesday this year, the pub was packed at 11.30am. If we didn’t do food we wouldn’t have been able to maintain that crowd all day.” The Ploughing Championships was also a busy time for O’Gorman’s The Bog Road in Portlaoise, Co Laois, which has become a “one-stop-shop” for food, according to owner Donal O’Gorman.



Food accounts for 70% of sales at the Bog Road says Donal O’Gorman

The Bog Road serves a traditional carvery daily between 12pm and 2.30pm and has a large and extensive menu between 2.30pm and 9pm. This includes 20 Asian dishes such as Pad Thai and Beef and Oyster Sauce. “We have four Asian chefs and started a takeaway service a year ago which is going very well,” says O’Gorman. “We keep working on the menu, taking off slow sellers and introducing new dishes. We’re starting to look at Mexican food and have introduced a fine dining element.”

O’Gorman employs 15 chefs between The Bog Road and his other premises in Kilminchy. “Fifteen years ago The Bog Road was a drink-only pub. We started with the carvery and then introduced the evening menu. Now food accounts for 70% of our sales,” he says.

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New generation reinventing the pub scene

There is a new breed of younger publicans in Ireland who like to think outside the box and continuously be adaptable – an approach which has helped their businesses to thrive no matter what the economic climate



Ernest Cantillon

Ever since Ernest Cantillon opened Sober Lane in Cork City in 2006 at the age of 23, he has always tried to do things to keep the pub relevant and give it an edge – from being the first pub in town to serve pizza made in-house from scratch to holding free table quizzes and bingo with novelty prizes. The name Sober Lane is somewhat tongue-in-cheek and a bit of a pun on Cantillon himself as he doesn't drink. There is a statue of Fr Matthew, one of the figures behind the temperance movement, two streets up.

"We serve good pints and have a good gin menu, but we like to have activities that take the focus away from whether people are drinking alcohol or not," explains Cantillon, who trained as a chef and has always made food an important focus in the pub. "We aim to be that 'third space' for people, after home and the workplace."

PARTY TIME

Forty-two year old Emmet Lynch has tripled the size of Hugh Lynch's in Tullamore since he took it over in 2004, transforming it from a purely a traditional 'old man' style pub into a live entertainment and party venue. An event which started out as a celebration of the pub being in the family for 40 years has turned into the annual Canal Quarter Festival, featuring live music and dance and various unusual activities from pool tables on the street to crazy golf.

"I've been lucky that most of the changes I made worked. Over the years, we've done all types of things from pig races at the side of the pub to salsa nights and having a clairvoyant upstairs," says Lynch. "We've had music acts ranging from The Strypes to The Wolfe Tones." Always thinking about what to do next, Lynch feels the future for pubs like Hugh Lynch's could be in accommodation.

Four years ago 27 year old William Clynch decided to give a dig out in the family pub, Moone High Cross Inn in Co Kildare, rather than go into teaching. "It was easy to get into it and I see the pub as my career now," he says. "The more effort I've made the more things have picked up."

Visited by celebrities including Clint Eastwood and Sandra Bullock, Moone High Cross Inn's client base was mainly older generation men when Clynch came in as a partner. "I could see that 20 years down the line this wouldn't be sustainable," he says. "We remodelled one of the parts of the bar to appeal to younger people and make it more female friendly. The bar was the first of 12 around the area to serve cocktails."

OPPORTUNITY KNOCKS

With the opening of Kilkea Castle Hotel nearby, Clynch saw an opportunity. "I marketed the pub as the place to go the day after weddings.



Thomas O'Sullivan

We've had six wedding parties in the past five months with the knock-on effect of staff parties from Kilkea Castle and three 21st parties in one month," he says. "I believe as areas become repopulated pubs will become more popular – as long as they put the effort in and create a comfortable environment."

Thomas O'Sullivan worked in pubs from the age of 16 and studied hotel management in Shannon College of Hotel Management. His final year placement was in the Four Seasons, Dublin where he continued to work after graduating in 2007.

Despite the economic crash, he decided to take up the opportunity to operate Russells Bar, Raheen and the Hi-Way bar in Dooradoyle, Co Limerick in 2009 with Ken Dunne. The pair opened their third premises, The Still House Bar on Thomas Street, Limerick, four years later. They take a structured and strategic approach in all that they do.

"Each of our properties has its own unique selling point and we operate them to their strengths," says O'Sullivan. "However, a common thread between them is that we hire good people who are genuinely friendly and caring. You're only as good as your weakest member of staff, so you have to train them all. We constantly liaise with our management and staff on our plans for growth and new business opportunities."



Emmet Lynch

A story to tell

Regardless of what people are drinking in Irish pubs nowadays, there's a higher expectation of quality, choice and, above all, a good story behind what is in their glass or bottle

When people order a drink in an Irish pub, the least they expect is a clean, dry, correct glass and a top quality product. But, increasingly, having a drink has become more of an experience now and pub-goers want to know where their drink has come from and how was it made.

Bar tenders have become historians and storytellers. Instead of simply serving, they need to be well versed in everything from the fact that monks were the first to distil Irish whiskey to the brewing process used by the craft brewer down the road.

Particularly in the case of premium Irish whiskey and craft beers, the trend is to sample more than one and learn about the various distilleries and microbreweries. Indeed, whiskey tasting is among the highest rated cultural experiences cited by tourists exiting the country, according to recent data from TripAdvisor.

Craft beer arrived onto the Irish pub scene in 2012 and there are now around 110 microbreweries in Ireland. Consumers like to hear about the passion and backgrounds of the entrepreneurs behind each brand and growth has been driven by a desire to support local businesses.

This is not to take away from draft beer – the Irish pub is still synonymous with the pint, but it has to be of the highest standard. According to The Irish Beer Market 2017 report from the Irish Brewers Association, Ireland's on-trade beer sales continue to outperform off-trade sales by 64.8% to 35.2%. No other country in the EU has a higher percentage of on-trade versus off-trade beer sales.

In recent years, gin has really caught the public's imagination and there has been a shift away from alcopops. Gin remains the fastest growing spirit category among Irish consumers, up by 47.2% in 2017, according to the Irish Spirits Association. Along with the arrival of the distinctive balloon glassware from Spain, ordering a gin and tonic has become quite a ceremony – people want to know about the distillery it came from, which tonic goes best with it and they expect different types of fruits and botanicals to be added.

This year, one of the biggest movements has been towards low-alcohol and non-alcoholic products, particularly since the introduction of Heineken 0.0 and Diageo's Open Gate Pure Brew. The desire for moderation, health and wellness are behind this trend on top of the fact that such products also take the worry out of driving home.



Global sales of low/no-alcohol drinks have risen by more than 20% in just one year, with low-alcohol beer and cider sales soaring by almost 30%, according to Kantar Worldpanel.

As Irish pubs transformed their food offerings, their clientele became more interested in ordering wine to pair with their meal and Prosecco has also become very popular for family occasions.

What will the next big thing be in terms of drinks? Perhaps it may be tequila or there could be a rum revival. Safe to say though, it is becoming less and less common for people to simply order "a beer" or "a gin and tonic".

“

The pint is still King – your pint drinkers are always going to be pint drinkers, they won't change but you have more of an offering for your customers now. They like the various Gins with all the trimmings and a large selection of wines. Customers are more informed of their choices. Tequila and Rum are going to be the next big thing, cocktail versions of them. People are coming back to the pub scene, they are beginning to see the pub has a lot more to offer and it is a great place to catch up with friends and make a night out special.

”

- Kieran Linnane, Castle Tavern, Thurles

“

Wine is our most popular drink. The product has really improved over the years. Whiskey is becoming very popular with our customers. They are mixing it with soda or tonic and a slice of lime. Gin or Vodka are still the most popular spirits though. Young people are coming to the pub later at night after maybe having had a few drinks at home and are willing to try different products. They like trying the different craft beers we have on offer

”

- John Tierney, Feehans, Cashel

“

The pint never goes out of fashion around here. It is still as popular as ever along with bottled beers. Gin has been very popular for the past year and this summer Gin and Vodka cocktails were the drink of choice, especially with our female customers. Gin seems to have replaced Vodka as the most popular spirit at the moment. Alco-pops are gone off the scene completely. I have been told that Whiskey is the next big thing but I don't know if Gin is going to lose any of its popularity anytime soon.

”

- Rose Younge, Younges The Ragg, Thurles

Rural pub going the extra mile

Pubs in rural locations have to work that bit harder to get people through their doors, from providing free transport to supporting local groups and holding special events – and their efforts are paying off



Paul and Mandeline Flint with their son outside Hopper's Bar, Walsh Island

Paul Flint, along with his wife Madeline, has owned The Hoppers in Walsh Island, Co Offaly, since 2003. They renamed the pub after Madeleine's late father Jim (Hopper) McGrath, who used to play with Bridge Céilí Band.

"The Hoppers is the hub of the village, which was created in the 1940s for Bord na Mona workers," says Paul Flint. "We have always worked hard to play our part in the local community."

The Flints are on the secretariat of the local development group which enters the Tidy Towns competition. The couple lends out equipment such as PA systems and Burco boilers for local events and there's a room in the pub where groups can hold meetings free of charge. On top of this, The Hoppers supports all of the local sports clubs in the wider parish in various ways.

"We are constantly trying to improve the look and feel of the pub and the things we do to pull the locals in," says Flint. This includes Hoppers Harvest, a vintage steam threshing event held every August with activities for all ages. For the pub's 50th anniversary in 2012, The Hoppers held a big celebration and charged customers the 'old money' price for a pint. Every fortnight, it runs free bingo nights and will collect and bring people home.

The pub went viral last April when the 'Today with Maura and Daithi' show on RTE1 featured a piece of archive footage from 1988 about a motorised bar stool invented by Madeline's then boyfriend Noel Duffy. Complete with a 50cc Honda engine, the bar stool still works and is a popular talking point in the only pub in the village.



Alice Lynch and her husband Neil outside their pub, Maggie's Tavern in St Johnston, Donegal

FROM A TO B

Providing such a transport service has become the norm lately for many publicans in rural areas, including Alice Lynch of Maggie's Tavern in St Johnston, Co Donegal and TJ McInerney of TJ Macs in Mullinahone, Co Tipperary.

Local fishermen used to be Maggie's Tavern's main source of income in the 1950s and 1960s. The pub had to reinvent itself when fishing was banned on the River Foyle in recent years. Lynch studied culinary arts and tourism at Letterkenny Institute of Technology to enhance the food offering and focus more on events.

"We have to work to get customers in by putting on different events, like live music, Spin the Wheel, fun cycles and barbeques," says Lynch. "There has to be a reason for people to come to the pub."

Located 7 miles from Derry and 6 miles from Strabane, the prospect of a hard Brexit is a concern now for Maggie's Tavern. "With labour and products cheaper in the North, we will have to be better at our job and always think about the right thing to do next," says Lynch.

A TASTE OF TENERIFE

For McInerney, the right thing this year was to open a new three-quarter acre beer garden inspired by the beach bars of Tenerife. Complete with cast-iron lanterns and a palm tree, the area has a sturdy timber bar serving draft beers, Jagermeister and spirits.

"TJ Macs is very much sports oriented and the place where everything happens including fundraisers, meetings and family occasions," says McInerney. "By doubling the size of the premises with the beer garden we've made it much more of an events centre. We've had staff parties and stag parties choose to come here instead of going to Kilkenny or Waterford."

The outdoor space has also been a big hit with families as a tranquil place to go during the day and for tourists who enjoy live bands at night. "We've had several parties for groups of tourists from the US and celebrity chef from Las Vegas Rick Moonen has paid us a visit," says McInerney.

The area is steeped in history from the monument to poet and Irish revolutionary Charles J Kickham outside the pub to the barracks and Killaghy Castle nearby. The refurbishment of the pub included two sets of new toilets. "If it wasn't for us, there would be no public toilet available for tourists," notes McInerney.



Relaxing in the sun in TJ Macs, Tipperary

Heart of the matter

The pub is a unique and treasured part of Irish heritage and – as research from the Vintners Federation of Ireland confirms – means a great deal to both Irish people and tourists

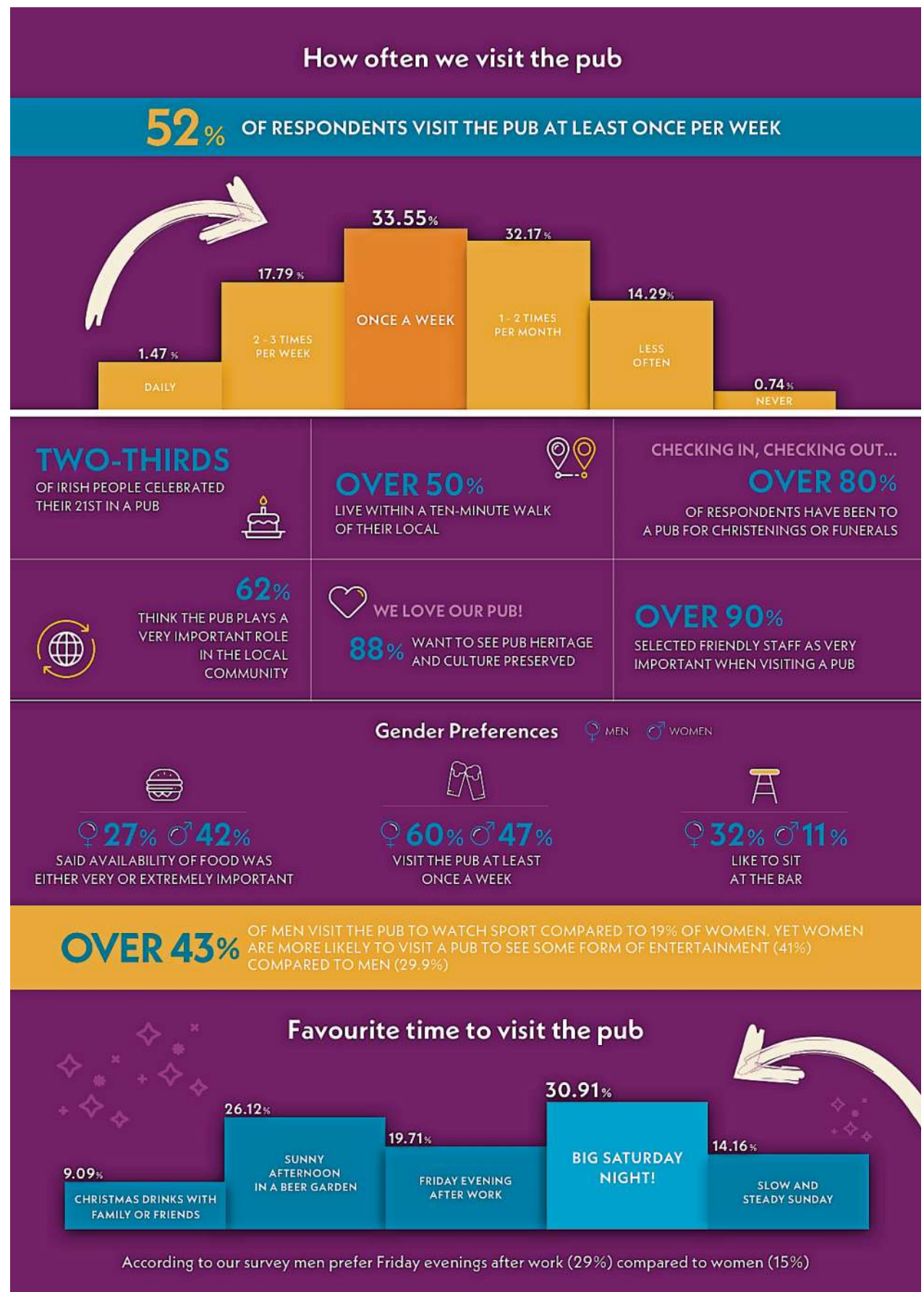
Ask any Irish person where they met their partner, what their most memorable family occasion was or simply a night when they had a great laugh with friends and chances are the local pub will have something to do with it.

Our culture is very influenced by new technologies and social media and consumer expectations are so much higher when people go out. But pubs have moved with the times and embraced these changes, ensuring they continue to be the heartbeat of local communities and an integral part of the Irish identity.

Recent research by the Vintners Federation of Ireland (VFI) demonstrated the clear affinity that exists between the people of Ireland and the pub. Two thirds of the 1,500 Irish people and tourists surveyed said they want to see pub culture and heritage preserved, while 62% of people believe the pub plays a pivotal role in local communities across Ireland.

The survey shows that over half the population visit the pub at least once a week, with 80% stating that the main reason is to meet friends and family. The pub is an important social hub for families in particular – the results show extremely high numbers for people who chose to mark christenings (82%) and funerals (89%) in their local.

Food has become a major draw for people, with 47% of those surveyed saying they frequent the pub to enjoy a meal – a testament to the high quality food offering and value for money available in pubs. The friendliness of staff ranked highest in terms of influencing people to visit a pub, followed closely by quality of service, cleanliness and the availability of food.



For tourists, going to a pub is a top priority in their holiday itineraries. The results of the VFI research cement the pub's position as the number one tourist attraction. They show that 88% of previous visitors to Ireland had spent time in the pub and a staggering 97% of tourists coming here soon intend to do the same.

For those visitors who had visited the pub, the most enjoyable aspects of their experience were music and entertainment (31%), having 'the craic' (30%) and meeting local Irish people (28%).

It's clear that Irish pubs are here to stay. While expectations are higher in terms of choice and quality, there's no doubt people both want and need pubs to bring them together and make their lives richer – and of course as simply a place to have fun!

WHAT DOES THE PUB MEAN TO US?

- Two thirds of Irish people celebrated their 21st in the pub
- 53% of respondents have enjoyed a first date in the pub
- Over 50% live within a ten minute walk of their local
- Nearly half of men visit the pub to watch sport, compared to 19% of women
- Women are more likely to go to the pub to see some form of entertainment (41%) compared to 29.9% of men
- Friday evening drinks after work are still a staple for Irish people, with almost one fifth saying this is their favourite time to be in the pub.

Source: VFI research





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